



by Paul Azevedo

When I was growing up in Santa Rosa, I met some people who had known Luther Burbank personally, and more who had known his gardeners and employees. Burbank was born in Massachusetts, but he came to Santa Rosa as a young man, and lived there 50 years. Before his death in 1926 he was America's most famous horticulturist.

He developed many famous vegetables, fruits, flowers and other plants like the spineless cactus, plants both ornamental and useful. He added billions of dollars to the productive wealth of the world, though he never became rich himself.

He developed many very real improvements in plants, producing the Shasta Daisy and the Santa Rosa plum, but I think his greatest achievement was as a PR man for the benefits of plant breeding and selection.

Burbank made his mark without the benefits of understanding Mendelian principles of heredity. His major achievements were already well on their way or complete and he was past 50 before Mendel's discoveries were appreciated by the world.

Burbank was responsible for shelves of books on horticulture. He was widely quoted. Children read of his life in school books, a Horatio Alger story come to life. "The Plant Wizard," like the "Wizard of Menlo Park" was a true 19th century type of American hero.

In the 1940s in Santa Rosa, the Christmas season began each year when the great Cedar of Lebanon which towered over the Burbank gardens was strung with lights and officially lit. Burbank had planted the tree, and he was buried beneath it. A boy or girl in those days could visit the oversized back yard where Burbank had experimented, and learn the botanical names of some of the specimens growing there. In the old home on the property Burbank's widow was living out her last years.

Santa Rosa kids were familiar with the pictures of Burbank in the company of Thomas Edison and Henry Ford and Harvey Firestone, a galaxy of American industrial heroes sitting in their shirtsleeves on Burbank's back porch, in Santa Rosa for a visit with a man as famous as they themselves were.

Next Sunday is Arbor Day, a day to celebrate trees and plants and growing things...and Burbank. It's a great time to visit a nursery to select a special tree or shrub for your yard. Choose one that has a special meaning to you. It might be a memory from your childhood, or a plant that reminds you of a favorite relative, or, as I have, a tree mentioned in a favorite book.

Seventeen years ago I planted a Ginkgo and a Dawn Redwood in my yard because I had so enjoyed "Dragons in Amber," a book by Willy Ley. Ley combined expertise in rocketry with a deep love of natural history.

I watch the leaves and the needles drop from the Ginkgo and the Dawn Redwood each fall, and then I watch in the spring as they renew themselves with new growth, and I am reminded what Willy Ley taught me, that these trees are living fossils, dinosaurs of the plant world surviving from a time unimaginably ancient and different.

So next Sunday plant a tree. Trees are something special. And while you are at it, drink a toast to Luther Burbank. Sunday is the 133rd anniversary of his birth.